

STATES OF JERSEY



PUBLIC HOLIDAYS AND BANK HOLIDAYS: DESIGNATION OF 19TH OCTOBER 2011

Lodged au Greffe on 3rd March 2011
by Deputy G.P. Southern of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

- (a) to agree that Wednesday 19th October should be designated as an extra public and bank holiday for 2011; and
- (b) to request the Chief Minister to bring forward for approval the necessary Act under the Public Holidays and Bank Holidays (Jersey) Law 1951 to give effect to the decision.

DEPUTY G.P. SOUTHERN OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

Members will no doubt recognise that 19th October this year is a significant date. It is election day, 2011. Not only is it election day, but it is to be the first general election day when Senators, Connétables and Deputies will all face the electorate on the same day. On this historic day I believe we should take a bold step to really attack the chronic problem of low turnout.

At the last election for Connétable in St. Helier, the turnout struggled to reach the mid-20s. The 2008 election, which also included a referendum vote on Central European Time, saw turnouts of around 45% – 50% in some Parishes and 34% in St. Helier.

Here is the turnout in each Parish in 2008 –

- St. Ouen – 46.69%
- St. Mary – 59.57%
- St. John – 49.44%
- Trinity – 51.52%
- St. Martin – 50.06%
- St. Peter – 51.52%
- St. Lawrence – 50.1%
- St. Helier – 34.05%
- St. Saviour – 51.52%
- Grouville – 52.4%
- St. Clement – 48.05%
- St. Brelade – 46.29%

Overall, these figures put Jersey near the bottom of the world election turnout table.

There are potentially many reasons for the low turnout in Jersey. There are many short-term residents not particularly interested in voting. There is also a confusing electoral system with 3 types of members in the States, and no tradition of party politics. These combine to produce a general lack of faith in the electorate that any election result can make any real difference.

One of the significant factors, however, must be the low turnout amongst workers in the urban areas. We live in an increasingly long-hours culture and, when it comes to voting, many will not go out of their way either on the way to or from work, or even in the evening, to trek down to the polling station to cast their ballot.

The idea is not without its supporters elsewhere. Local and general elections should be held over a weekend or on a special mid-week bank holiday in order to combat low voter turnout in the UK, a Labour MP has said. With many voters expected not to bother to vote in local elections in England and Scotland, and separate polls for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South and Finsbury, says it is time for the Government to look at ways of making it easier for people to vote.

In last year's local elections in the UK, turnout fell by 4 points to 36%, despite extended voting hours, postal voting and warm and sunny weather across the country on polling day.

According to the Institute for Public Policy Research, turnout is in long-term decline and the young and poor are less and less likely to vote.

At the last election, young people – those aged 18–25 – were only half as likely to vote as those aged 65 and over. All the evidence suggests that young people are not picking up the voting habit as they grow older. In 1992, 70% of 20 year-olds voted, but by 2001, turnout among the same generation, now in their late 30s, had fallen to less than 40%.

Turnout of 59% and 61% of registered voters in the last 2 general elections was the lowest since 1918, while local elections have seen a decline in turnout in London from 48% in 1990 to 32% in 2002.

Miss Thornberry says if the Government is serious about reducing inequalities in election turnout and making it easier for everyone to vote, elections should be moved away from a regular workday.

“The most obvious option is to have elections on Saturdays but we could also consider holding them on Wednesdays and making election day a bank holiday,” she wrote in a collection of essays published by the IPPR.

“An unusual day off in the middle of the week would draw attention to the election and it would give more people the time to vote, yet without encouraging them to take the day as part of a long weekend.”

In the most recent first round of France’s presidential elections held on a Sunday, there was a record 87% turnout.

Perhaps the time has come for us to consider radical changes to the way in which we generate some genuine interest and enthusiasm for the voting process in Jersey. A public holiday leaves no-one with any excuse not to vote. It could be just the thing we need to revive our flagging democracy.

Financial and manpower implications

An additional public holiday in the Island in election year would be funded from departmental budgets. We have been told in the past that the cost to the public sector of a bank holiday is of the order of £1.5 million. As the majority of States employees work ‘regular hours’ the actual additional cost is for those employees on shift work relating to *time in lieu* and *overtime* payments, but this figure is significantly less than the £1.5 million stated.